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Heaven and hell aren't what we think.

Privilige of heaven

Arnie couldn't remember quite how long he had stood in line. It felt literally like forever.

Considering that he was, to his understanding, very dead, it could very well have been for almost that long. And, alas, he doubted it was the line to the pearly gates.

Mostly because he saw no gates, pearly or otherwise, and the surroundings looked darkish red, dry and bleak. A scarred, black desert heavily domed by unchanging, evenly red sky.

Alas, the long line of people, dressed in various attires. He really wondered if it was the clothes they had died in, their favourite clothes or just some random attire that suited them, and who had decided that; he got a strange memory of an old sci-fi flick where people lived in a virtual reality and in that reality looked like they believed they looked – “residual self image” it was called – was that it here? Most were old; a few were young, even a few children no newborn though, to his great relief. How would they even move up the line? Maybe lack of baptism wasn't a sin after all? Men women, white, black, brown, reddish... He himself, of course, a medium management man of later middle ages, with white short-sleeved shirt and fine, soft pants, heavy glasses covering his somewhat overgrown nose and equally overgrown belly. His wife had loved his nose when they were young, before it grew out of shape and full of protruding nose-hair. Time flies.

”Ahem.”

His pondering was cut– it felt he had just begun a line of thought, which ran at odds with his impression of having been in line forever.

”Ahem” the oddly soft voice repeated.

Arnie looked up. He realised he should be shocked, terrified, but felt oddly indifferent to the demonic figure in front of him. Well, demonic-ish. It almost looked cartoony. It was pastel red, thin, almost inhumanly thin, slightly taller than him with slim but long horns protruding from the sides of its head, and a lazily moving tail, swinging dully from side to side.

”Eh, sorry, yes?”

”Arnold Dermatian?” the devil demanded.

“Y-Yes. Am I in hell?”

The creature looked absolutely bored. “Yes. Did you often imagine heaven this way?” Sarcasm ran like honey from its serpentine tongue.

”Sorry, I am new to this.”

”Oh, first time dead.” If it could have rolled its eyes higher it would have escaped its skull.

Arnie didn’t know what to make of that remark. Could you die multiple times perhaps?

”No.” the beast answered.

”Wait, you can read my mind?”

”Yes.” It answered dryly.

“Sorry, again...”

”First time, I get it.”

”Sorry, don’t want to take up time from the line...”

The red figure lowered its bushy black eyebrows and actually smiled.

”Oh don’t worry; we have all the time in eternity.”

”Wait, really?”

”Really.” It answered unsarcastically.

”Oh. So... sorry, but... can I ask some questions?”

It shrugged softly “Why not. I bet though, that you can’t ask a question I have never heard before.”

”Wait, is that a devil’s trick kind of bet or...”

”No. Just me keeping my hopes down for any surprises.”

”Oh?” Arnie wasn’t sure how to interpret that.

It sighed heavily. “This isn’t just hell for you, you know. It is for us workers here as well. We have heard every question, every excuse, every demand and every pleading you could possibly imagine, and more.”

”I... I see. Well, first off... why am I here?”

"You really don't know?" the question was deeply sarcastical.

"I really don't. I have lived an honest life, I went to church, I paid my dues and I was faithful to my wife... raised my children Christian..." He shivered as a thought hit him – had he had the wrong faith?

The demon smirked. "No. There is no right faith. Or wrong faith. Heck, even lack of faith is not a deal breaker. It is how you were as a person that counts.

Arnie looked back and saw the seemingly limitless line that stretched back as far behind him as he could see... which was far indeed. This... realm seemed to have no curvature like earth did.

"It doesn't" the devil said, again reading his mind. And again, don't worry, we have eternity, and no one is in a hurry here. You barely noticed the line before you got here, right? Same for all of them."

"Oh. Sorry, I..."

"No need to apologise here. Too late for that sort of thing anyways. Although I will admit I appreciate courtesy. Not all are so civilised when their turn comes to be registered."

"Oh, so that is what you do?"

"Sort of. I suppose you could say that in life, human life I mean, I could have been working under you as an administrator or an archivist of sorts. It is my job to inform people of why they are here, when they don't realise it themselves. Happens more often than you would think. Keeps me up to speed on all of these fates." He feigned looking through a long list of papers that hadn't been in its hands earlier.

"Okey so why AM I here." Arnie demanded sheepishly. He tried to sound resolute, as in the workplace meetings when his underlings had underperformed, but found himself rather powerless in this situation.

It sighed heavily again. "I cannot believe that creatures such as you, capable of creating civilisations, inventing marvels and understanding stars and atoms still cannot fathom yourselves.

Arnie felt a strange sting of shame. He kind of understood what the devilish administrator was on about.

"You are here because you cheated on reports that led to people losing jobs, just to save your bosses some money. Sure, it was their demand on you, but you could have refused. Being under orders is not an excuse. And for bullying young DiFranco in school. And later Rebecca Groux in high school. For tricking your friend Mike to do a stupid stunt that you knew would make him look bad in front of his almost girlfriend, just because you wanted her as well. And for a thousand other petty and meaningless things that you have an apparently subconscious guilt over. This was your decision."

”Wait what? My decision?”

”Oh yes. Well, partially at least. Your guilt was never over anything big, like a murder or rape or anything like that. More like a death by a thousand cuts. And sure, you did some good things, but just being a regular mildly decent person doesn’t balance up all that bad. In these cases, your conscience decides your fate.”

”But not for all?”

”No, of course not. Imagine! Psychopaths, sociopaths, madmen with delusions of godhood and whatnot getting away with genocide because they believe they are in the right. No, that would be rather unjust, don’t you think?”

”I suppose” Arnie answered sheepishly. “But... there are levels in hell, right? I mean, I heard of purgatory and limbo, and...”

”No no no no no. None of that catholic nonsense. There is only a hell and a heaven. No tiers, no limbos, no purgatories that clean your soul after such and such amount of torment.”

”That hardly seems fair.” He started feeling a bit upset... but oddly he didn’t actually feel upset.

”I didn’t create this system, I am just an administrator here.”

”Can I appeal? You know, before god or...” He realised it must have sounded almost heretical for a white collar New Yorker to demand a meeting with the manager, in this case the creator or everything.

”No, sorry. No one has seen the creator since, well, the creation. In fact, not even we know exactly why these afterlives exist. Something about a grand plan. In any case, it is hardly relevant any more. Thirteen, almost fourteen billion years ago, as you would count it, and no news. We have stopped waiting. We just keep it running because we honestly don’t know what else to do.”

It was a lot to take in for him. He wanted to stretch out his arms as he felt that his knees should feel weak, but, again, oddly he felt nothing.

”So, for a lot of minor sins I am to burn in hell for ever, just like any mass murderer?”

”Burn? No one burns here. Do you see any fires?”

He indeed saw no fires. And although this reality seemed to have no curvature, distance was still distance.

”No fires” the devil repeated. You want to know why?”

Arnie didn't answer, but curiosity forced him to shake his head ever so subtly.

The devil suddenly pulled out an obsidian black pitchfork and after looking at it for a second, ran it right through the man.

Arnie moaned with a sigh, preparing for a wave of pain that, to his surprise, never came.

The demon snickered slightly. "You do realise that you are dead, right? You have no corporeal form. Your form is just your imagination really. It is what you are used to see yourself as, and since there really is no tangible reality that you can perceive, your mind creates this... illusion of yourself. And, really, of everything around you."

"So... you are not real?"

"Oh I am very real. I just don't look like this." He ran his fingers along his chest as if showing a new jacket. "You see me as you imagine I would be. And to be honest, it is a kind of innocent, almost childish version compared to the many other versions I have been. I cannot even tell you what some people imagine me to be... especially the late medieval-renaissance folks with their groin-faces and whatnot. And that is far from the worst."

"Sorry, I have a hard time grappling all this."

"I understand. You needn't worry, you can't have a heart attack any more."

"So... if no god around, why haven't you gone topside and taken over the world?"

It sighed again, as if taken from something mildly refreshing to an old soundly beaten and very dead horse.

"Because that is not what we are."

"But the bible..."

"...is, as I said, utterly irrelevant. We are not in fact demons or punishers or tormentors. You don't feel pain, remember? And we are not in fact evil. Well, at least not in any sense you could understand, I imagine. We are here for a job. You could almost consider us machines."

"Robots?"

"Well, no, robots are somatic machines of physical relevance. More like... programmes perhaps? AI you call it?"

”Oh... Wait...”

”No it isn’t a trick. What purpose would it serve to trick you now? We don’t even trick you when you are alive. Again, not evil. We don’t really care where you go after you die, but if you end up here, you are handled by us.

He wanted to swallow hard, but realised the pointlessness of it having no real body anymore. It was kind of hard getting used to it, even he intellectually understood it. In fact, he was oddly aware of it, as if what he had been told didn’t really get dimmed down by memory processes.

”Okey. So the landscape isn’t real either, as I understand it. I just believe I deserve punishment, and I see what I think it should look like.”

”Yes. Precisely.”

”But then what is the punishment part? If I feel no pain, and I can imagine away everything horrible I might see...”

”Well it doesn’t work by force of will. But your imagination will change slightly over time. In my experience, most residents go from the hellscape vista toward a more grey, bland view over time. But not all.”

“But the punishment..?”

”Well, eternity of course!”

”An eternity of nothing with countless other people?”

”Yes.”

”I don’t see the punishment in that. I mean, I can talk to them right?”

”Yes.”

”Learn their stories, make jokes, socialise, play, whatever?”

”Yes.”

”So what is the punishment in that?”

”You really don’t see it?”

”No. No pain, no hunger, no death, no sadness, just people to learn from and talk to for eternity...”

The devil nodded sadly.

”So?”

”My man” it said with a lowered head and a sad voice.” Eternity. You have forgotten one very important question. You almost tripped on it earlier.”

”What?”

”Your mind is not hampered by flesh anymore. You remember everything perfectly. Once you have heard a story, you will never forget it. A joke once told will always be remembered. Once someone has told you everything, that is always with you. Forever. You forget nothing. Ever.”

”So? There will be nearly endless amounts of people here! I will never run out of people to talk to and to learn from! This is HEAVEN!”

”No. Humanity had a start, and it has an end. Be it billions, even trillions souls down here, eventually you WILL have met them all, talked to them all, heard the same stories again and again – take it from me – you will eventually have heard EVERYTHING.”

”And?”

”And that will just have been, in your perspective, within a finite period of time. You will be stuck here forever.”

Arnie looked incredulously at the demon, feeling a strange trepidation as the understanding of what the creature said slowly sank into his unforgetting conscience.

”You will be bored, because you will lack the one thing that they have in heaven that we don’t have here – forgetfulness.”

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